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UNCLAS HELSINKI 000075

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: PAAVO LIPPONEN'S SILLY SEASON COMMENTS ON NATO AND THE U.S.

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. NOFORN. PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

1. (SBU) Finnish Speaker of Parliament and former Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen prompted a media feeding frenzy this week when he publicly criticized Conservative (CONS) presidential candidate Sauli Niinisto's increasingly pro-NATO arguments and urged caution toward NATO membership because it would "make Finland an ally of the United States." Such commentary surprised us as well as many Finns; Lipponen has long been one of Europe's staunchest advocates of a strong trans-Atlantic security relationship and, indeed, is widely viewed as the leader of a growing faction within the Social Democratic Party (SDP) that favors joining NATO. Some commentators have defended Lipponen, saying he made his comments in the context of an increasingly heated election battle and as part of a strongly worded endorsement of fellow SDP member Tarja Halonen's re-election bid. Nevertheless, the vast majority (including, of course, Niinisto's camp) have accused Lipponen of abandoning -- or at least sacrificing temporarily -- his long-held views for the sake of supporting Halonen, with whom he has often disagreed on NATO and other trans-Atlantic questions.

2. (SBU) On Jan. 26, Charge called Lipponen to hear his side of the story. He welcomed the call with warmth and good humor, joking that he was "glad to have the opportunity to explain this before they send a team in from Washington." The press, Lipponen said, had misread his attempt to clarify for voters some of the misleading statements Candidate Niinisto had made during the campaign. Niinisto has argued that Finland should consider eventual membership in a "more European NATO," implying wrongly -- in Lipponen's view -- that the U.S. role in NATO is somehow declining. My comments, he continued, simply sought to remind voters that the U.S. remains the predominant player in NATO, which is a good thing but which also should not be ignored. He emphasized that there has been no change in his views: He sees a close relationship with the U.S. as crucial to European security; will continue to promote a close bilateral Finnish-US relationship that, for now, stops short of Finnish membership; and considers eventual Finnish NATO membership as favorable, once the political leadership has convinced the general public of its merits. Regarding the last point, Lipponen added, the GOF's position is that NATO membership must be addressed carefully and systematically, and cannot be rushed.

3. (SBU) COMMENT: Charge's call confirmed what we already knew: Lipponen has certainly not abandoned his stance on NATO or his largely pro-American views; indeed, his private comments track closely with views he has long espoused. However, we also suspect a bit of "silly season" opportunism in his public comments. Lipponen has proven himself as a pragmatic, forward-thinking statesman on the European stage; still, he retains his instincts as a party politician at home and is not above a bit of political expediency.

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